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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 VATICAN 000142

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SUBJECT: LEBANON-ISRAEL: VATICAN FINE-TUNING ITS POSITION

REF: VATICAN 134

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CLASSIFIED BY: Peter Martin, CDA, Vatican, State.  
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

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Summary

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¶1. (C) Pope Benedict XVI's July 18 comment expressing support for the G-8 statement on the crisis in Lebanon and Israel helped establish a more helpful Vatican position on the conflict after a more one-sided statement by Cardinal Secretary of State Sodano July 14 (reftel). Holy See messages on violence in Lebanon and Israel are following a twenty-year old template of decrying both terrorism and military reprisals, especially when civilians make up the majority of victims. Other Vatican-related experts and bishops have offered a range of assessments of the situation, always expressing deep concern about civilian victims. The nuance of the message will vary, but the Vatican will surely continue to speak up loudly on behalf of civilian victims, especially in light of Lebanon's substantial Christian population.

¶2. (C) That said, the point that this is an opportunity for Lebanon to cleanse itself of Hezbollah and finally solve this problem has seemed to resonate with some Vatican officials in our continuing private conversations. Our emphasizing the united G-8 line may also be having some effect. Contacts have confirmed to us that Lebanese PM Siniora and Saad Hariri have been in contact with Sodano, looking for Holy See help in resolving the conflict. End Summary.

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Traditional Holy See Position Well-Known

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¶3. (SBU) The pope and Vatican officials have been following their well-known custom of condemning both terrorism and military reprisals that lead to civilian suffering when addressing the current Israel-Lebanon conflict. While reftel noted Cardinal Prime Minister Sodano's July 14 statement that singled out Israel for particular criticism, the pope issued a

more nuanced statement July 16 (emailed to EUR/WE) in which, among other things, he noted that Haifa had been bombed.

¶4. (SBU) Then, Pope Benedict told reporters July 18 that he was in "complete agreement" with the G8 statement on resolving the crisis. "I have nothing to add," he continued, "except that it's important to pray to God to help us." Benedict is currently on vacation and made the brief statement in response to journalists' questions as he returned from a day-trip.

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Asking the Vatican for Help  
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¶5. (C) Vatican-based media reported July 20 that Lebanese PM Siniora had contacted Sodano to request help in resolving the crisis with Israel. Media reported "a long communication by telephone" between the PM and Sodano in which Siniora called for the immediate intervention of the Holy See to push the parties to announce a ceasefire, and Sodano expressed the pope's special interest in Lebanon. Our contacts in Sodano's office confirmed that Sodano had spoken to Siniora - and the gist of the conversation - but cautioned us not to read too much into the call. "[Sodano] is going to talk to anyone who wants to address this dire situation," our source said. He also confirmed that Sodano would be meeting with Saad Hariri, son of the assassinated Lebanese Prime Minister.

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Various Voices Add to Buzz at Vatican  
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¶6. (SBU) Voices linked - even if tenuously - to the Holy See have produced disparate messages in the last few days. Middle East specialist and Egyptian-born Jesuit Father Samir Khalil

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Samir attributed the root cause of the rise of Hezbollah and Palestinian terrorism to Israel's former occupation of southern Lebanon and its current "illegal" occupation of the Golan Heights and the Palestinian Territories. During his July 18 radio interview, Father Samir equated the Hezbollah terrorism with the actions of the partisans in Nazi-occupied France during the Second World War.

¶7. (SBU) Meanwhile, Franciscan Father David Jaeger, the influential Holy See negotiator on Vatican-Israel issues, described Israeli PM Olmert as the "only moderate voice" on the crisis, and more or less accepted Israel's reasons for attacking Lebanon. According to Jaeger, the Palestinians will be the biggest losers of the current crisis because the Hezbollah rocket attacks and kidnappings have turned attention away from the humanitarian crisis in Gaza and stymied negotiations for the release of another kidnapped Israeli soldier, as well as talks aimed at an eventual cease-fire in the Gaza Strip. Jaeger, hardly an apologist for Israel despite being Israeli-born, said that the government of Lebanon needed to show some courage and reaffirm Lebanese sovereignty, suppressing Hezbollah.

¶8. (SBU) Vatican-based media have also reported the opinions of Catholic bishops responsible for dioceses in northern Israel and Beirut in recent days. Archbishop Paul Nabil Sayah of Haifa declared the situation in Lebanon as "atrocious." He noted that almost 95 percent of casualties in Lebanon were civilians and said the Lebanese feel that have been "hijacked and used by everyone and his uncle." Sayah described the current situation as "simply dirty politics" using "unthinkable means." "Everyone who has a problem comes to settle it in Lebanon," he said. The archbishop called for a halt to "the carnage."

¶9. (SBU) Similar sentiments came from the bishop responsible for Roman Catholics in Beirut. Archbishop Paul Dahdah said

Catholic institutions were collaborating with other Christian churches to provide refuge and assistance, and decried the attacks on innocent people. The archbishop lamented that once again the Lebanese people "are the victims of the historical conflict between Israel and the Palestinians." He said international calls for a ceasefire should now be put into action and urged a strong intervention in order to safeguard everyone's human rights.

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Comment

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¶10. (C) The various statements above, reproduced in Catholic and secular papers here and throughout the world, will have some effect on public opinion, but papal and other official statements obviously carry the most weight. These are generally bound to follow the Vatican's twenty-year pattern of saying no to terrorism, no to reprisals, expressing concern for civilians, and urging dialogue and negotiation. With Lebanon's substantial Christian population at risk, Vatican officials feel even more compelled to decry any military action by Israel affecting civilians.

¶11. (C) Since Sodano and FM-equivalent Lajolo (privately also very critical of Israel, imploring the U.S. to take action to rein it in) are both leaving their posts in September, they may be feeling somewhat more freedom than normal in their statements. There are various opinions as to how much clearance Sodano had from the pope for his Friday statement, but with the pontiff having issued a milder message Sunday, and then endorsing the G-8 statement, it would be difficult for Sodano to repeat his strong criticism of Israel.

¶12. (C) In continuing conversations with Vatican officials, we have made the point that this is an opportunity for Lebanon finally to rid itself of Hezbollah and eliminate the cause of many problems in the region. The safety of civilians will always be a Vatican priority, but given the Holy See's concern for the region as a whole, and its continuing concern about Islamic fundamentalism, this argument and the united G-8 line has appeared to resonate.

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